

## Vendorbrarians: Librarians Who Work for Vendors and the Value They Provide to Library Customers

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# Vendorbrarians: Librarians Who Work for Vendors and the Value They Provide to Library Customers

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## Abstract

A panel of librarians working for different kinds of library vendors discussed their unique and valuable roles inside their organizations. The session was moderated by an Electronic Resources Librarian with an interest in library/vendor relationships. Librarians can add value to their company's relationships with library customers as they share the same basic skill set as their colleagues in libraries and have a better understanding of their needs, industry standards, and the day to day realities of their customers. Topics discussed included the kinds of roles librarians can have at vendors, how these positions compare and contrast with more traditional library work, their identities in the library profession, how library school did and did not prepare them for their jobs, and more.

## Background on Panel From the Moderator (Charlie Remy):

I work a great deal with vendors in my role as an electronic resources librarian. Sometimes sales representatives know little about libraries' needs, and this lack of knowledge can even extend to the products they are selling. Libraries have unique requirements compared to businesses or consumers, and time and effort must be spent to familiarize oneself with our organizational cultures and values. Several of my sales representatives or other vendor contacts have library degrees, and I have noticed that I need to explain much less about my library's operations to them. They seem to already "get it." These positive experiences caused me to wonder about the realities of being a vendorbrarian (a librarian working for a vendor).

I am interested in the relationships between libraries and vendors. Traditionally, many librarians have relegated vendors to "the other side"—these interactions perhaps not being the most pleasant part of their job duties. I, however, see vendor relationships as productive partnerships whose end result is providing the user with high quality information that is easily accessible. It does not have to be a negative or adversarial relationship. Librarians could not exist without vendors and vice versa. I believe that librarians working for vendors have the potential

to ameliorate what can sometimes be challenging relationships between very different kinds of organizations

Library schools continue to graduate sizable numbers of librarians, yet the professional job market can be rather limited, especially when someone is unable to move far away. This can lead to underemployment (part-time, paraprofessional level work) or unemployment where one might have to choose another profession because of the lack of opportunities. Library school graduates should be made aware that working for a vendor can be a viable and satisfying career option.

Vendors can play a role in combating limited library employment opportunities by creating new positions that harness the knowledge and skill sets of librarians as well as hiring librarians for existing jobs. Discussions like this panel can educate vendors on the value that librarians bring to their organizations and the customers they serve. It is likely that vendors with many librarians on staff can generate goodwill among their customers, which could benefit their bottom lines in the long term.

I deliberately chose a group of panelists working for a variety of companies (for-profit/non-profit, publishers/integrated library systems) so that the audience could see the different kinds of vendors that have librarians on staff. Despite their varying

amounts of traditional library experience, all three panelists share a strong service ethic that is an integral part of librarianship.

### **Introduction and Explanation of Individual Roles of Each Panelist. Number of Librarians Employed at Each Company.**

*Bob Boissy:* As the manager of account development and strategic alliances at Springer, Bob works with clients post-sale on access, administrative issues, usage, etc. We have four librarians on staff in the US in account development and external policy roles, and others working in metadata jobs in Germany.

*Jalyn Kelley:* Kelley is the client services manager at IEEE Xplore Digital Library, which is a team of 10 librarians around the world. Our primary goal is to raise awareness and knowledge of the digital library through training and promotional activities. We help our customers get the most out of their existing subscriptions and respond to any librarian-to-librarian questions that arise.

*Marliese Thomas:* As a solutions architect with Ex Libris Group, I serve as a liaison between account managers, product developers, and clients. I offer technical demonstrations of Alma and Primo products, answer functional questions from librarians, and make recommendations to best suit the institution or consortium's needs.

### **How Did You Make the Decision to Work for a Vendor and Why? How Did You Get to Where You Are Now?**

*Bob Boissy:* I had two job offers after library school—one in an academic library and one in training/support for a vendor. The vendor position paid \$5,000 more in annual salary and the opportunities for advancement were good, so the decision was made to work for the vendor. It was not clear at the time how hard it might be to return to library employment.

*Jalyn Kelley:* I worked in a virtual corporate library for seven years and while I enjoyed working from home, I wanted more interaction. In this position I

have the best of both worlds—travel 60% to 75% of the time and work from home the rest.

*Marliese Thomas:* I had worked in university libraries for seven years and loved much of my work. However, I wanted something that would give me a wider perspective of how libraries worked, a more diverse skill set. The higher salary doesn't hurt, but I feel I am a more effective librarian and advocate to our profession now, as well.

### **Specific Examples of Panelists Bringing Value to Customer Experience and Their Vendors in General.**

*Bob Boissy:* I identify issues with customer implementations early by looking at usage, discovery, catalog, set up, etc.; support local events and survey research; and convene topical meetings to brainstorm solutions to common problems with visibility and use of e-resources.

*Jalyn Kelley:* Client Services managers are the voices of the customers. We track customer requests for enhancements and help identify issues and trends early. For example, Client Services was able to help internal stakeholders understand the importance of discovery tools and identify issues with linking, which led to the creation of a dedicated Discovery Services Manager position.

*Marliese Thomas:* I couldn't do my job well if it weren't for all of my previous experiences. Having been a Voyager cataloger and in-the-trenches instruction librarian, I can better empathize with current librarians' pain points and reservations about moving to new systems. I understand why certain things are important and can advocate on their behalf with product managers and account managers.

### **Challenges of Working for a Vendor**

*Bob Boissy:* I can't respond to controversial issues/topics on listservs or other public venues, and I must adapt to travel demands.

*Jalyn Kelley:* Differing philosophies, as a librarian I want to provide access to as many people as possible while working to support a sales team.

*Marliese Thomas:* It goes beyond being self-motivated. Traveling 70% of the time and in a home office the other, I am responsible for my own happiness and work-life balance. Technology is key to keeping me connected with friends, family, and coworkers.

### **Moving Between the Worlds of Vendors and Libraries For Profit Versus Non-Profit.**

*Bob Boissy:* I went to library school before the arrival of the Internet and never really worked in a library setting. Skills have changed and I feel it is more difficult to move to a library. Academic librarianship seems harder than a vendor job in some technical aspects, and in the variety of prerequisite skills needed.

*Jalyn Kelley:* There is a segment of the library community that will look down on you for working for a vendor. When I took this position, I was told by one library manager that I would never work in a “real” library again. But I feel more prepared to work in a library environment now that I have vendor experience.

*Marliese Thomas:* Having previously worked in non-profit corporate, for-profit corporate, and academic venues, it’s interesting to be in a mix of them all. You are more direct and responsive, but often have to tailor your speech to the personalities of the clients.

### **Can Library Schools Prepare Us for This Work? What Do You Wish You Knew From Library School?**

*Bob Boissy:* I am very involved in industry activities and NASIG, and am an ambassador at three library schools. Library school does not require a lot of credits but is useful to introduce students to the scope of library work. I wish I had developed more personal relationships with faculty to get involved in their research, etc.

*Jalyn Kelley:* I attended library school more than 15 years ago and was in a special libraries track which did not include instructional services courses, presentation skills, etc. If I had known then what I know now, I would have taken marketing and business classes to supplement my library school curriculum.

*Marliese Thomas:* My library school focused on concepts, so in that sense, it helped prepare me to think of the larger library structure instead of traditional work functions. Also, the people I met through graduate school and interns, mentors, and friends have helped shape and advance my career.

### **Influence That Librarians Can Have on Vendors Without Actually Working for Them**

*Bob Boissy:* Librarians can influence with many technical recommendations, especially relating to holdings, access, title lists, etc. Librarians need to ask for automated feeds and be more aggressive on data exchange issues. Take part in advisory boards and standards groups and work to apply more market pressure on vendors.

*Jalyn Kelley:* Take every opportunity to talk to or meet with your vendors and give feedback regularly—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

*Marliese Thomas:* Make noise. Let us know when something doesn’t work, when something makes your life easier. Partner with us, don’t fight us.

### **Questions and Comments From the Audience**

*Question 1: Do you feel an extra responsibility to advocate for libraries?*

*Panelists:* Yes—concerning: ILL, text/data mining, sharing, and OA; things that don’t have commercial value but are important for libraries; goodwill; being engaged with professional organizations; and developing relationships to gather intelligence.

*Marliese Thomas:* I see now how much impact librarians have on everything my company does. I don't feel the need to advocate for them, as librarians are well-represented in the company, but I want libraries to know how much difference they can make.

*Question 2: What are some new skills that you've acquired in this role?*

*Panelists:* Spreadsheets, customer relationship management systems, public speaking, meeting strangers, eating by yourself, self-motivation/accountability, work/life balance with so much travel.

*Marliese Thomas:* I learned to take care of myself on the road, to be direct without challenging. We develop little routines or rituals for consistency even with all the travel to new places.

*Question 3: What things do you miss about working in a library?*

*Panelists:* Helping patrons with research, physically working with people, acquisitions discussions, seeing end results of changes, and the students.

*Marliese Thomas:* I miss my students. As the outreach librarian, I developed some close relationships with many "kids," and I miss their good natured humor and outlook.

*Question 4: (Comment): Some vendorbrarians have regular offices and don't travel much.*

*Question 5 (Comment): There's a misperception that vendors have a ton of resources.*

*Panelists:* It would be nice to have 3-month paid sabbaticals to work at libraries and vice versa. This would help bridge the gap between libraries and vendors. Speed of decisions can often be much quicker depending on the vendor. Some vendors have to seek approval from a board that changes.

## **Concluding Thoughts From Moderator**

It is clear that these panelists enjoy their vendorbrarian roles despite some challenges such as frequent travel and occasional contrasts in philosophies. Current or aspiring librarians may want to consider working for vendors due to the professional growth opportunities as well as the likelihood for higher salaries in the private sector.

One commonality I noticed among the panelists is a focus on optimizing their products to satisfy a given library's unique set of conditions. They want their customers to get the most out of their content or utilities. This benefits libraries, especially in an era of flat or declining budgets, because it increases the likelihood of a satisfactory return on investment.

In one way or another, the panelists are advocates for library customers within their organizations. They have a solid understanding of library operations and needs as a result of attending library school. Library customers may feel more comfortable providing them with candid feedback that they can in turn articulate with higher-level managers to hopefully improve product offerings, support, and customer service. They can also help to bridge any barriers that may present themselves due to divergent organizational cultures.

My hope is that this panel has demonstrated the value that vendorbrarians provide to both the organizations for which they work and their library customers. Vendors should seriously consider hiring more librarians either for existing roles or creating new positions, particularly in the areas of post-sales support and discovery services. This is a proactive long-term strategy for vendors because it could result in improved library relationships, better returns on investments, and in turn, possibly more sales in the future.